RIDING GIANTS

The 21st annual conference of the Association for Learning Technology (September 1 to 3, 2014)

A SUPPLEMENT PRODUCED BY FE WEEK

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STAYING AHEAD OF THE WAVE ON TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION

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Hello, and welcome to this *FE Week* supplement covering the 21st annual Association of Learning Technology (ALT) conference.

Since last year's conference the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (Feltag) report has been published, detailing a series of recommendations to improve the use of technology in FE.

The report, and the prolonged consultations with FE and technology experts which produced it, has put learning technology, if not centre stage, then closer to the limelight than it's ever been.

It's no surprise then that technologists gathered at the ALT conference were asking: what's next? How do we maintain the momentum Feltag and its cross-sector successor, the Education Technology Action Group (Etag), has created? And how do we try to stay ahead of the curve when we don't know what technologies the future holds?

With this in mind, the conference itself was entitled Riding Giants — innovating and educating ahead of the wave, and on page three ALT chief executive Maren Deepwell introduces the conference and gives us some of her highlights.

For those who are looking to innovate but wondering how to finance it, *FE Week* takes a look at some of the funding programmes available on page four.

However, Feltag was part of a process, not an end in itself, and an ALT survey found there was a long way to go, as ALT president Diana Laurillard explains on page 5.

On page six, Matt Dean, the Association of College's technology policy manager, says government must support the sector in implementing Feltag. And you can read about the government's response to Feltag just before his piece on the same page, where Jade Kesall, Manchester University's e-learning technologist, also explains how colleges can work with technologists to produce relevant learning material.

On page seven there is a flavour of some of the sessions and conversations that were happening at the conference.

Bryan Mathers, learning technology consultant for City & Guilds, describes what institutional qualities are need to support innovation on page 10, where Rachel Challen, e-learning manager at Loughborough College, explains what they're doing to comply with Feltag.

On page 11 you can meet the FE stars of this year's Learning Technologist of the Year Awards and on pages 12 and 13 there is coverage of the conference debate on Feltag implementation, along with a piece from Martin Hamilton, Jisc futurologist, wondering what Feltag can do for young people not in employment, education or training.

Finally, we find out what conference delegates thought with some vox pops from the floor, and online on Twitter.

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MAREN DEEPWELL

CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ASSOCIATION FOR LEARNING TECHNOLOGY (ALT)

Riding giants? From surfing metaphor to innovation, risk and fun

Maren Deepwell explains the themes for this year's ALT conference and gives her FE highlights.

More than a year ago we started planning for this, the 21st Annual Conference of the ALT. It can be hard to decide what questions will be most relevant this far ahead, particularly when our community is focused on keeping pace with technology at break-neck speed.

Our overriding theme for the conference was therefore Riding Giants — How to innovate and educate ahead of the wave, and this is all about focusing on some of the big questions that face us including how to innovate at scale, making a difference for all learners; how to tackle risk when things change continuously and sharing examples of the creativity and exciting experiments across the sectors.

The first day of the conference included two sessions that I had particularly been looking forward to.

The first by invited speakers Fiona Harvey, lead for digital literacies in the Centre for Innovation in Technologies and Education at the University of Southampton and Bryan Mathers, learning technologist at City & Guilds. Fiona, who is also the chair of ALT's Mooc (massive open online course) special interest group (SIG), is going to focus on recent developments in Moocs and other open courses, while Bryan will focus on innovation and examine how important it is to nurture a culture of innovation in your organisation, and if so, what you can do to grow it.

Day two was supported by sponsors City & Guilds and had a focus on FE and cross-sector engagement. The day's programme featured sessions and activities related to ALT's work in FE and across sectors including a keynote speech from Catherine Cronin (lecturer and academic coordinator of online IT programmes, National University of Ireland, Galway) with the title Navigating the Marvellous: Openness in Education, in which Catherine explored the challenges of being open in education and posed the question whether openness is a 'survival trait' for the future.

Also on Tuesday was an open policy debate, chaired by Diana Laurillard, chair of ALT, which brought together members of the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (Feltag) and the Education Technology Action Group (Etag) with other experts from across sectors for an open exchange about recent technology in education policy developments. One of the questions discussed was the proposed 10 per cent online learning provision, practical recommendations from Feltag and the results of a recent ALT member survey on current use of learning technology across sectors.

The final day of the conference focused on research in learning technology and specifically relevant to the FE community may be the recent survey ALT undertook on the use of learning technology as well as the joint position paper by the Association of Colleges and ALT — a summary discussion of the use of learning technologies in FE [see page five for more].

What I really hope all participants, whether in Warwick or online, took away from this year's conference were new connections to the ALT community that will make a difference to their work throughout the coming year.

Over the three days, we hope you found inspiration, ideas and practical solutions — but over the coming 365 days the connections you made, whether to individuals, services like our newsletter or activities like the ALT SIGs, will make a real impact on the effective use of learning technology for your learners wherever they are — from a college or university to work-based and family learning.

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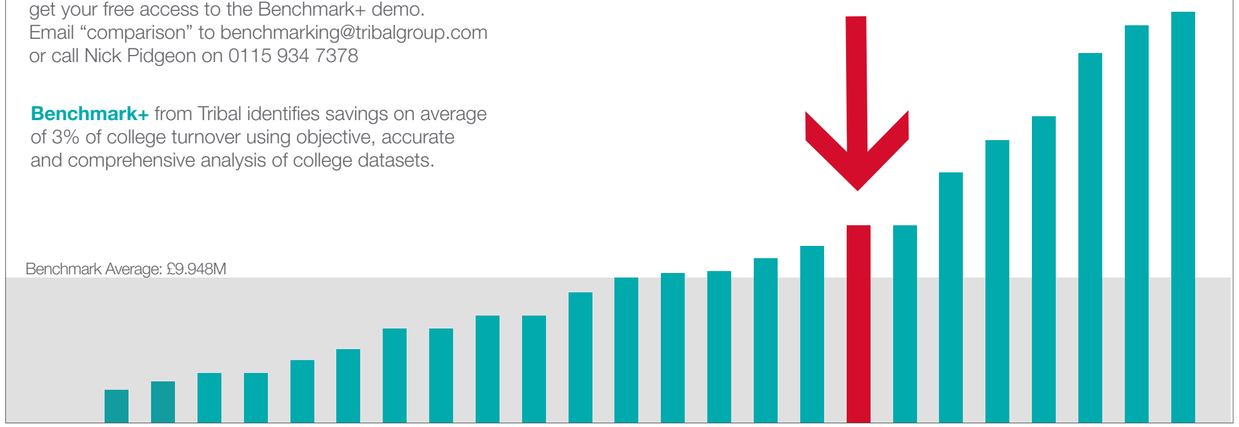

The one million pound question

The use of technology in FE is increasing rapidly, and much of the innovation is being driven from the bottom up, with individual teachers and providers coming up with new ways to use technology and solve teaching problems.
So for practitioners who have a project in mind, what extra funding is available to help them develop it and spread it beyond their own classroom?
FE Week takes a look at the two main options available.

The Education and Training Foundation

The Education and Training Foundation announced a £1m funding and mentoring scheme last month, giving out grants of up to £50,000 to innovative learning technology projects.

Between now and September 26, the Learning Futures fund, administered by the Gazelle Colleges Group, invites staff to apply for £20,000 or £50,000 to develop new ideas and promote them across the sector.

Jenny Williams (pictured), foundation director of vocational education and training said: "We want to get behind staff at all levels to support their ambitions to use learning technologies to deliver high quality outcomes for learners and employers.

"Our aim in the Learning Futures Programme is to unlock innovation in teaching and learning, help teachers and trainers to be confident and skilled in the design and delivery of technology enhanced learning; and encourage employer engagement that will ensure access to industry standard technology and improve the line of sight to work on vocational programmes."

Of the £1m, £700,000 will go directly to the projects, while the other 30 per cent will be used by Gazelle to cover its administrative costs.

A Gazelle spokesperson said the £300,000 would be "committed to managing the project over its 12-month duration and also to creating a new online community to bring together staff from across the sector to develop ideas and promote innovation around learning technology.

"Overheads for the programme include part-time personnel, a single programme co-ordinator, research, events and running costs," he said.

"Gazelle is delivering Learning Futures on a non-profit basis and all funding will go either directly into projects or the delivery of the programme.

"Overheads have been kept to a minimum and over 70 per cent of the total funding is going into supporting and developing the projects."

The Gazelle spokesperson added that the organisation expected to fund approximately 17 projects.

The scheme has already attracted 94 expressions of interest from FE Colleges, adult and community learning organisations, training providers, employers, city and borough councils and schools with sixth forms through the Learning Futures website.

Gazelle chief executive Fintan Donohue said: "We hope that the Learning Futures programme, together with the extensive learning technology programme being coordinated by JISC, will help our education and training organisations from across the sector to make informed decisions about strategies and investment in learning technologies in the years ahead."

Organisations wishing to apply for funding should visit the Learning Futures funding portal at www.lfutures.co.uk.

Bid writing support is also available, which the Gazelle spokesperson said it was hoped would "encourage those who have not participated in this type of process in the past to get involved".

The University for industry

The University for Industry (Ufi) charitable trust is bringing its first round of funded projects to pilot as it looks to treble the amount of funding it has on offer to £3m.

The trust was formerly the owner of Learndirect, and when the adult learning provider was sold in 2012, Ufi was left with £50m which it pledged to spend on supporting and promoting innovative ideas for combining teaching and technology.

Rebecca Garrod-Waters, Ufi chief executive, said: "The key word for us is about scalability — even if the project is only working with a small amount of people in the first part, they're ultimately going to reach a lot of people in the long term."

However, the trust initially struggled to find projects to support when it invited the sector to submit innovative ideas for development in 2012.

Board member Bob Harrison (pictured) said: "When Ufi put the tenders out in their first round of funding I think there was quite a lot of disappointment at what

came back — it wasn't scalable, people hadn't thought through what they wanted to achieve or how technology would help them do that.

"But to be honest, I think that's a reflection of where the sector was at that point in time — but now we've had the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group and things are moving on a bit."

However, two of the projects which did manage to attract funding were Oculus, a virtual reality training programme which simulates everyday scenarios in the retail and care industries, and Citizen Maths, a massive online open course (Mooc) designed to help more adults get to grips with everyday mathematics.

Citizen Maths, which went live last month, is free and is aimed at learners at level two.

Ms Garrod-Waters said Ufi hoped the project would to attract 4,000 users and avoid the low retention rates typically suffered by Moocs.

"Anyone can sign up to a website in five minutes and never look at it again," she said.

"But with Citizen Maths the website makes a point of explaining to people what's involved — asking them why they want to take the course so that people registering know they have to commit a bit of time.

"Of course there'll be a certain drop-out rate, there always is, but we're hoping to try and combat that and keep people engaged."

If the basic programme is successful, the project may well be expanded into other areas of maths, she added.

And it is not just Citizen Maths that is hoping to get bigger, with Ufi looking to treble the funding it is offering in the next 18 months to £3m.

The trust was also planning to offer more than just funding, said Ms Garrod-Waters.

"We're looking to create a Ufi community — once you've been funded by us you'll get support from us but also we want to get a sort of alumni, where projects that have previously been funded help other, newer projects," she said.

Although the trust is not currently officially tendering for bids, Ms Garrod-Waters said organisations and practitioners with potential projects could still gain funding.

"We're always interested in having people approach us with ideas for projects, we're always ready to listen," she said.

Visit www.ufi.co.uk for more details.

Survey finds barriers to innovation

With the recommendations of the Further Education Technology Action Group (Feltag) set to be implemented, you'd be forgiven for thinking the future was rosy for education technology.

Government appears on board and the Education Technology Action Group (Etag) is following in Feltag's footsteps.

However, when an Association for Learning Technology (ALT) survey on the effective use of learning technology in education asked learning technologists what they saw as barriers to innovation, many said the same problems were continuing to haunt learning technologists.

The results were published in July, but *FE Week* caught up with ALT president Diana Laurillard to find out what she made of the survey's message.

"I suppose the most interesting thing was that nothing has changed in ten years," said Dr Laurillard.

"We're still in the position that most people in the field who want to innovate still feel they get no time, no encouragement, no leadership."

And, she added, she was "not optimistic" about the situation changing in the near future.

However, she said: "Innovation is going on, but it's happening despite the system.

"The innovation is personal and local, it's not collaborative or systemised, you do your own thing — and if you're inspected, you hide the innovation until the inspectors have gone.

"People aren't getting any reward or recognition for what they're doing."

There were she said, also issues with leadership highlighted by the survey, both at government level and college leadership level.

However, she added: "I think there was a common feeling that working from the ground up is fine, you can't necessarily work top down — but there's what you do need from the top is funding, and there is none.

"And if you say to senior managers they've got to find it in their existing budget, they'll just laugh because they're already strapped for cash."

Dr Laurillard's concerns about management were echoed by a joint ALT and Association of Colleges position paper, published this week.

It said: "A move away from defining 'efficiency' as simple cost-cutting is required.

"An 'efficient' educational system, or individual college, is one that deploys its resources in the most useful, relevant and appropriate ways to ensure that students receive the education they require and want."

The paper concluded: "Technology cannot be viewed as somehow separate from, or ancillary to, the wider context within which education is discussed, planned and delivered."

Ultimately, said Dr Laurillard, the most important change that could be made was increased collaboration between practitioners and institutions.

"It the innovation continues not to be shared, not to be collaborative, you get much less bang for your buck, you don't get the same quality of innovation," she said.

Diana Laurillard

Link to survey — www.alt.ac.uk/sites/alt.ac.uk/files/public/ALTsurvey%20for%20ETAG%202014.pdf

The survey was commissioned in April as part of the Etag consultation process, and attracted responses from 75 people, both members and non-members from across all educational sectors.

AGREEMENT WITH THE DESCRIPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE USE OF LEARNING TECHNOLOGY

The descriptions of barriers were derived from the survey carried out for Feltag within the FE sector. The aim was to test the extent to which these were recognised across all sectors. There was general agreement with all statements.

Government responds to Feltag

The government described its response to the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (Feltag), published in June, as "positive".

It introduced funding mechanisms to ensure providers complied with the recommendation that all courses have 10 per cent online delivery, as well as providing funding and regulations for college infrastructure.

Then-Skills Minister Matthew Hancock said: "I sincerely hope that this response will encourage others to develop a vision for the future which exploits the tremendous potential technology can offer to enhance learning."

To gauge the current level of the sector's online delivery, and to prepare to move towards the 10 per cent recommendation in 2015/16, the government introduced a new field to the individual learner record specification, asking providers to say how much of their course was online.

It also pledged £5m to the Jisc broadband system, to comply with Feltag recommendations that infrastructure be improved, and pledged that any new college buildings would have to include "industrial-strength" technological infrastructure in plans and costings.

Ofsted will also be required to ask learners about their experience of learning technology use during inspections.

However, the response said many of the proposals were not government's responsibility, but that the government would be "encouraging" sector bodies such at the Education and Training Foundation to comply with others.

Mr Hancock said: "We have recognised that while government will do what is needed to remove these obstacles, it is for everyone involved to take ownership of new technology. Many actions are for the Further Education sector, too."

EXPERTS

MATT DEAN

TECHNOLOGY POLICY MANAGER, ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES

Feltag clarity is what's needed now

Colleges need greater clarity on what is expected in order not only to meet the aspiration of the government's Feltag policy, but to do so within the context of funding and inspection.

This is not to say that greater regulation or prescription is necessary, but to argue for a sufficient degree of guidance to allow colleges to develop strategies for the use of learning technology.

Feltag's aspiration is to increase the nature and scope of technology in FE.

Central to that was identifying any barriers, real or perceived, to more colleges adopting technologies that will enhance learning and improve outcomes.

The government response described what barriers there may be in getting colleges to take up more learning technologies and how they might be overcome.

Various agencies are working out how they will implement the government's response to the recommendations, and the work being developed by the cross department Education Technology Action Group (Etag), and how those recommendations will be integrated into the other technology focused aspects of the policy agenda.

The role of coordination and oversight is crucial.

The recent government reshuffle, and the mechanics of the way governments operate in the run up to an election, puts at risk the Feltag's recommendations, as well as the government response.

What is needed is clear explanation about what is to be mandated (if anything), what colleges ought to be working towards and what agencies will be tasked.

It is hoped that that Jisc and the Education and Training Foundation, taking lead roles in implementing Feltag's recommendations, will not only describe the relevant priorities, but will also address the issues around policy integration, how colleges might implement the recommendations and what colleges will be required to do.

This is important because colleges are operating in an increasingly difficult financial environment and will need to target resources where they will be most effective.

As with learning technologies, the implications of the Feltag recommendations are not confined to one aspect of what colleges do.

For instance, to adopt the principle of 10 per cent of all programmes being delivered online will require changes to curriculum design, planning and assessment, to infrastructure investment and management, to funding methodologies, to staff training and to inspection.

By implication, such a change will involve not only college staff, but the funding agencies, awarding bodies, Ofsted, and the relevant government departments.

Simply making sure there is regular and appropriate communication between the various groups involved in each of Feltag's recommendations is, in this phase of the election cycle, a difficult job.

JADE KELSALL

E-LEARNING TECHNOLOGIST, UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

The meeting of expert minds in pursuit of learning technology

The challenge of developing learning technology to meet course needs is best met by collaboration between a learning technologist and a specialist in an educational field. The partnership needs communication, clear objectives and respect for each other's expertise, explains Jade Kelsall.

As a learning technologist, it's common to work with a subject matter expert (SME) when developing online learning materials.

As a learning technologist, it's common to work with a SME when developing online learning materials.

Your SME will be knowledgeable in the topic and will provide the content for the materials; this relationship can present challenges. Some of the most common challenges identified by e-learning professionals include getting time commitments from SMEs for review meetings; managing feedback and revisions to avoid getting requests for drastic last-minute changes and getting appreciation of expertise as an instructional designer from your SME.

As an instructional designer and e-learning developer, I've worked with SMEs on creating e-learning materials for many years, and in that time I've developed processes and techniques for overcoming these challenges — a mixture of instructional design, project management and relationship management techniques.

The very first thing I do when working with an SME is to talk them through the entire process. I'll explain all of the stages involved to set expectations at the outset in terms of who is responsible for what, and what we can expect from each other. I also establish what level of involvement they want. I lay out the minimum level of input I need, and additional input I'd like from them and let them decide how much they want to contribute. This allows them some flexibility, and gives them some ownership of the process and the product.

The next stage is to identify learning objectives which forces the SME to step away from the content. The key question here is what should the user be able to do by the end? This is clearly a key development stage for any instructional design; by involving the SME in the process it helps get you off to the right start in avoiding an information-dump. It also helps you to start to establishing credibility (if you don't already have it) as an expert in instructional design.

Then we'll discuss the approach we'll take with the resource. We start talking through ideas and think about the benefits of online delivery for the topic. This should get your SME to start viewing instructional design for e-learning as an expertise in itself. It's helpful to show examples wherever possible to demonstrate the possibilities, particularly in working with people not used to e-learning development.

Having thought about the approach, we'll produce a skeleton plan for the resource. The main focus here is on the structure of the learning experience, rather than the content. It's helpful to use templates for this and every other milestone document you choose to use; be clear on exactly what you're expecting from them. The skeleton plan is signed off by the content owner. Specific sign-off points throughout the process help to mitigate the possibility of last minute changes.

The next stage is storyboarding. This is where we get into detail; using the skeleton plan as the basic framework, the storyboard will be a screen-by-screen detailed plan of all content that will be included within our resource. It includes all copy as it'll appear in the final resource, and specific details of how the content will be organised within slides and full details of any activities within. Being this explicit while still in the planning stage further helps to mitigate time-consuming changes later on in the process.

Once the storyboard is complete, it'll go to an external person for review, as well as to the SME for sign-off; this is the final stage at which any major changes can take place.

Next comes the development, after which we do a final quality assurance (QA) review. There should be no surprises here, due to the diligence of previous QA and sign-off points; we're usually looking for typos, and checking the functionality. Content changes should be minimal if any.

By following a structured, explicit process, setting clear expectations and including key sign-off points, you can avoid a lot of the tension that is common for learning technologists working with SMEs.

Out and about at conference

Here are a few of the *FE Week* highlights from the ALT conference

FELTAG 'MAKES ME SAD'

Following the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (Feltag) report, all programmes will be required to deliver 10 per cent of their content online by 2015/16 and the Skills Funding Agency has provided strict guidelines on what will count as online learning.

However, Rachel Challen (pictured right), e-learning manager at Loughborough College said: "Completely contrary to the Feltag report, anything that requires any tutor interaction in any way, shape or form is not considered online learning."

She added: "So Feltag was on a conversational model, the funding is on nothing.

"I wish they'd spoken to somebody and put in some realistic, official and achievable criteria.

"They've said that online learning is just some resources on a virtual learning environment (VLE) and that makes me sad."

The Feltag requirement, she said, could also impact on courses for learners with learning difficulties and dyslexia, who may struggle to benefit from simply reading materials online without tutor support.

"Because the report says 10 per cent of all programmes, it doesn't differentiate between programs and qualifications — that's something we've really struggled with," she added.

ARCHITECTURAL TYRANNY

Keynote speaker Catherine Cronin (pictured right), IT lecturer at the National University of Ireland, Galway, examined how open education can engage learners who may otherwise feel shut out of the learning environment.

Part of the problem, she said, was caused by ideas of formal and informal learning.

"When we want to know something, we search and we connect…but unfortunately the things this entails, maybe going on to Google or Wikipedia, are things that we counsel our students not to do — informal learning practices," she said.

"The message students are getting is that… what they do outside the institution is not valid, not valued and they shouldn't talk about it in our institutions."

Moving part of the teaching online, she continued, could move away from "the tyranny of architecture" of traditional lecture spaces that gave the teacher power and prevented students from feeling part of a community.

"Any learning space is just a space, and we can't be seduced into thinking the one we create is the learning space," she said.

Any learning space is just a space, and we can't be seduced into thinking the one we create is the learning space

Catherine Cronin

ONLINE ASSESSMENT 'THE NORM WITHIN FIVE YEARS'

Simon Kear (pictured right), who developed Goldsmiths University's online assessment system, said the future of submitting online work was likely to include greater use of audio and visual files.

This could have implications for vocational learning, allowing a greater amount of work to submitted online.

"In my mind, within five years online assessment will be the norm," he said.

"By that I mean that all work will be submitted online that can be — it's not appropriate for everything.

"And if you look to the future, we've got to include video and audio submissions in there, both for submissions and feedback.

"Lecturers can give feedback to individual students, at the same time students can submit audio or visual files."

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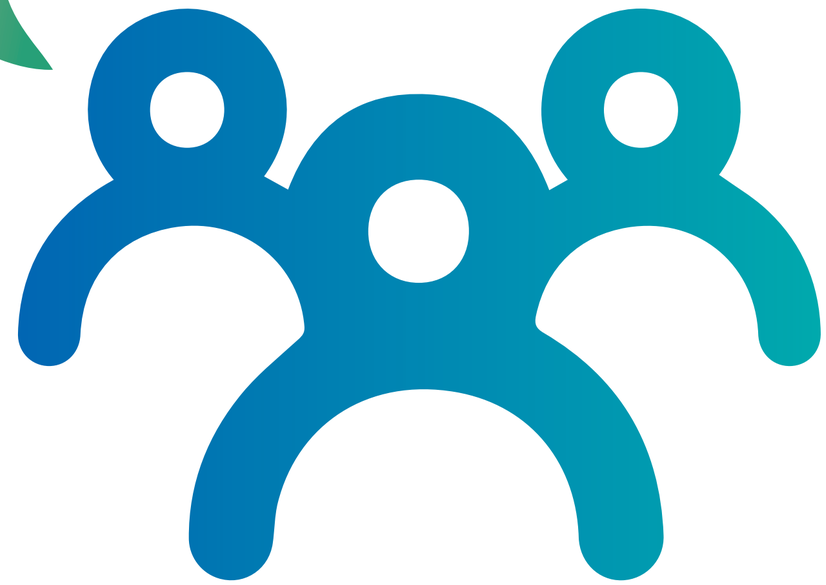
"Using e-track is an essential part of the College's operations. All our assessors are in the field so it's an essential tool for us, our assessors can upload every learner's progress to their laptops and then synchronise them at the end of the day. I don't know how we would manage without it."
Newcastle College

"[With Maytas] We can treat the data as gospel as it's gone through validation. Having accurate information on learners is essential - less errors equals better cash flow for the College."
MIS Manager, Newcastle College Group

"Implementing ebs4 enabled the college to consolidate systems, reduce double data entry and improve business processing which has resulted in staff having more time to concentrate on college priorities."
Chris Richard, Merthyr Tydfil College



EXPERTS

RACHEL CHALLEN

E-LEARNING MANAGER, LOUGHBOROUGH COLLEGE

Putting Feltag recommendations in their place

Rachel Challen explains how Loughborough College is putting the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (Feltag) recommendations into practice.

The highly-anticipated Feltag report was launched in March this year and immediately evident was a huge commitment surrounding issues of student empowerment, upskilling of tutors, employer engagement and changing cultural paradigms in FE, among many other themes.

It was hugely exciting to read a report that considered all the elements needed to encourage the use of technology in FE while understanding that pedagogy should be at the heart of everything we do.

Loughborough College welcomed the report and is embedding the Feltag recommendations in our student induction, staff CPD and technology celebration day.

We have also ensured that our online learning environments are accessible, usable and welcoming. In-house, we have developed an online tool that enables the creation of effective quality online resources quickly and without a large training overhead. It is really important that if the cultural change is to be 'sticky', we have to provide the environment, tools and resources to enable that to happen.

While some of the original Feltag recommendations were addressed in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills response, the main aspect has been the funding target: all publicly funded programmes should have a wholly online component of 10 per cent by 2015/16.

This percentage is to be recorded in the Individual Learner Record (ILR) and in return colleges will receive an online learning funding rate, details of which are yet to be announced.

For colleges, which live with a constantly changing funding landscape, being funded in this way indicates it will invariably become the primary focus.

In addition, students will be asked about their online learning experience with a new question in the Ofsted learner survey 'I am enabled and empowered to use technology and online resources to support my learning'. It remains to be seen whether this question will be valuable for colleges trying to ascertain the impact of the online learning provided and if correlations between experience and achievement can be made directly from the answers received.

It should go without saying that the online components have to be pedagogically sound, that they are embedded holistically within the learners existing resources in order to make clear synoptic links between modes of delivery and that they also comply with regulations.

The ILR Provider Support Manual for 2014 to 2015 gives some examples of what does and doesn't constitute online learning for the purposes of funding, which gives a clearer idea of what will be accepted by the Skills Funding Agency. These examples appear to indicate that no tutor interaction is expected for the online component, which is a different pedagogical method implied by the Feltag report which favoured an approach based on Laurillard's 'conversational model'.

This does have an immediate impact on how we develop our resources and the level of content needed. Here at Loughborough, a basic calculation shows that across all our programmes we have to develop almost 6,500 hours of online learning.

This process needs careful planning and meaningful collaboration between the e-learning and curriculum teams in order that all online learning developed continues to be of a high and consistent quality, supports a good student experience and maintains student achievement levels.

The actual year-long development plan adapts to different departmental priorities and has to take into account not only subject specific criteria but the impending changes in BTec and the agility of the FE curriculum offer.

Due to this we don't have a set action plan that everyone is following but we are offering curriculum teams a variety of approaches including flipped learning and whole unit development.

Our Feltag online development plan is already in progress, we are embracing all the themes within the recommendations and are holding Loughborough College's first Technology Celebration day on the October 22 to share practice and inspire tutors.

The Feltag report is quickly becoming a key impetus for a change of culture within FE and it is very welcome.

BRYAN MATHERS

LEARNING TECHNOLOGY CONSULTANT FOR CITY & GUILDS

Space to breathe — ingredients for innovation in FE

How to stay ahead on learning technology is no easy question to answer. However, Bryan Mathers thinks there are institutional characteristics that go some way to helping innovation.

The Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (Feltag) issued its report in February, outlining recommendations for learning institutions, employers, government and the funding and regulatory landscape on how to embed technology into teaching, learning and assessment.

Since then, I've had a number of conversations with college staff about its recommendations, the government response, and Feltag's ongoing momentum.

It's great to see that the report has already had an impact and the more forward-thinking institutions are getting on with it.

At City & Guilds, we've set up the Think Out Loud Club — www.thinkoutloudclub.com — to facilitate conversation regarding the innovative use of technology in FE, and allow practitioners to openly discuss the barriers as well as the opportunities that exist.

Without fail, that conversation always boils down to two key themes — culture and leadership.

It's quite easy to tell if you've got a culture of experimentation in your organisation. When you come up with an idea, are you encouraged to experiment or do you have to operate under the radar?

A couple of years ago, I went from working full time to four days per week in order to spend time in my "man shed" — complete with heater, whiteboard and an ancient iMac. My wife thought it was just another mid-life crisis, but it evolved into so much more.

I found that the thinking, tinkering, experimenting and ultimately learning in my shed, which often felt quite messy and unfocused, actually started to benefit my day job.

Of course, Google has been encouraging employees to do self-initiated projects for years. In fact, it's written into the company's very DNA.

That's why it came as no surprise when Google announced the Project Wing concept — using drones to deliver stuff to people. Can you imagine coming up with an idea like that in a meeting at your organisation? Would the seed of your idea be watered and allowed to grow, or simply stamped out and laughed at. What sort of culture enables crazy, left-field ideas? One that gives staff some space to explore.

We all need time to breathe. To reflect. To allow our creative juices to flow.

How much better would our education system be if every practitioner had one day a-week to focus on self-directed, interest-led, experimental learning, with accountability to their peers and institution?

Without it, colleges could continue to emphasise performance at the expense of practitioner-driven innovation.

> **The most innovative college leadership teams give staff the freedom to experiment**

Good culture is facilitated by good leadership. But what does a good leader do? It seems to me that the most innovative college leadership teams give staff the freedom to experiment. They focus on creating a belief system that people truly believe in — not just the staff but also the students.

Most would prefer a culture that performs, but is also innovative, and there's no reason why you can't have elements of both.

But ultimately, a company's culture is driven by its top priority. So if performance is the name of the game, that priority will become embedded into the heart of the organisation's culture. A performance-oriented culture usually leads to the "filling a bucket" approach to education as opposed to "lighting a fire".

If you want an illustration of this, dig out the classic film "Dead Poet's Society" starring Robin Williams.

Lighting that fire in vocational education is crucial for innovative teaching, which in turn will help young people become more innovative too.

EXPERTS

Learning Technologist of the year award

The Learning Technologist of the Year award, given out on day two of the conference, celebrated innovation in education technology across all sectors.
An award is offered for outstanding individuals and for teams, and two entrants from the world of FE, James Kieft and Tom Andrew, stood out in the individual category gaining recognition for their contribution to their colleges.
The winners in the team category were the learning technology team from the University of Northampton while James Pickering from the University of Leeds won the individual category.

JAMES KIEFT

E-learning and Resources Manager, Reading College. Joint runner-up in the individual award category

James Kieft receiving his award from Sarah Cornelius, conference co-chair

James Kieft was joint runner-up in the individual award for his work as e-learning resources manager at Reading College.

He has replaced the college's virtual learning environment (VLE) with Google community and hangout apps, which he says, has been a big hit with staff and students alike.

"We were trying to get staff and students to see tech as something that was integral to learning and was something that could allow them to learn anytime, anywhere, and was something that wasn't necessarily provided by the institution — it was something they could use and choose to use regardless of the institution providing it," he said.

"It's been an interesting journey — the staff have really taken to it, the fact that they can steer and deliver education the way that they want, with freedom.

"I think what's been a surprise actually is the excitement they've had developing their own VLE using Google communities and Google classrooms and Google sites — staff and students have been coming up to me in corridor going 'look, I've done this' because they're excited by it. They're excited by it and the students are excited by it."

He said he was "delighted" to have been nominated.

"I'm absolutely gobsmacked," he said. "I just get on and do my day to day job, I don't think I'm doing anything different or special so for them to nominate me and for me to be shortlisted and to get the runner-up prize is a complete surprise."

TOM ANDREW

Tom Andrew, information and learning development coordinator, Aylesbury College. Highly commended in the individual award category

Tom Andrew, information and learning technology development coordinator at Aylesbury College, gained an honourable mention in the individual category.

After moving into learning technology from teaching, he has worked with the college to create an app to replace the printed student handbook for new students, providing information such as term dates, procedures, IT services, and sports programmes.

He has also developed and improved the VLE resources and won funding for maths and English technology resources, all of which, he said were "having a significant impact".

"I was actually nominated by my manager and didn't know about it until a week or so before they did the shortlisting interviews," he said.

"I was obviously a bit surprised but it's important to be recognised outside of my organisation and to see my work in the bigger picture.

"I'm proud that my organisation was able to promote me like this."

He added: "The challenge is coming up with innovations which don't cost a huge amount of money but have significant impact on students."

His background in teaching, he said, had been helpful in developing the college's technology strategy.

"I come up with an ideas I put myself back in my teaching shoes and think would this be a good idea, would this be useful for a teacher? Would a teacher like this, would a student like this?" he said.

"I don't technological innovation is a choice. We're developing students who are going to go out into the work place quite soon and they're going to be using this technology — there's almost no job that doesn't use technology. It's everywhere."

Life after the report — the Feltag and Etag debate

Members of the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) considered the future of the organisation in light of key FE sector movements.

They shared their thoughts on the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (Feltag) and its successor, the Education Technology Action Group (Etag), before considering what their response should be.

President of ALT Diana Laurillard chaired the debate, which took in views from across the FE sector.

"We're now at the point where we've got to ask, as a membership organisation, as an independent, non-governmental voice, what's the role of ALT in all of this?" she said.

One response from the floor argued that as a membership body, it should be playing a prominent role in the implementation of Feltag's recommendations.

"Feltag and Etag are firsts in that there haven't been efforts to find out what people think and need in this way," said one audience member.

"We've had always a succession of poorly or well-resourced entities such as Jisc or the ETF [Education and Training Foundation], which is the fourth or fifth body to occupy the same space in the last 12 years.

"ALT's existence has lasted several governments' worth and it's up to us to ensure we're playing the role we should be playing.

"Central government initiatives have ignored the role played by membership organisations and we could have done much more with the same amount of money than they have done."

Nigel Ecclesfield, head of change implementation support programmes for FE and skills at Jisc, warned the sector shouldn't shy away from some of the hard questions raised by Feltag.

"It's provided a forum for us to present evidence and information, around some of the difficult issues on inspection and funding," he said.

"At least it has bought those difficulties into the open, so we can pick up on the aspirations."

He added: "If you look at the Feltag report, these are mostly not fixed targets over a period — I think the Minister wanted to see that — but in fact, the end result has been something that's rather more nuanced than that."

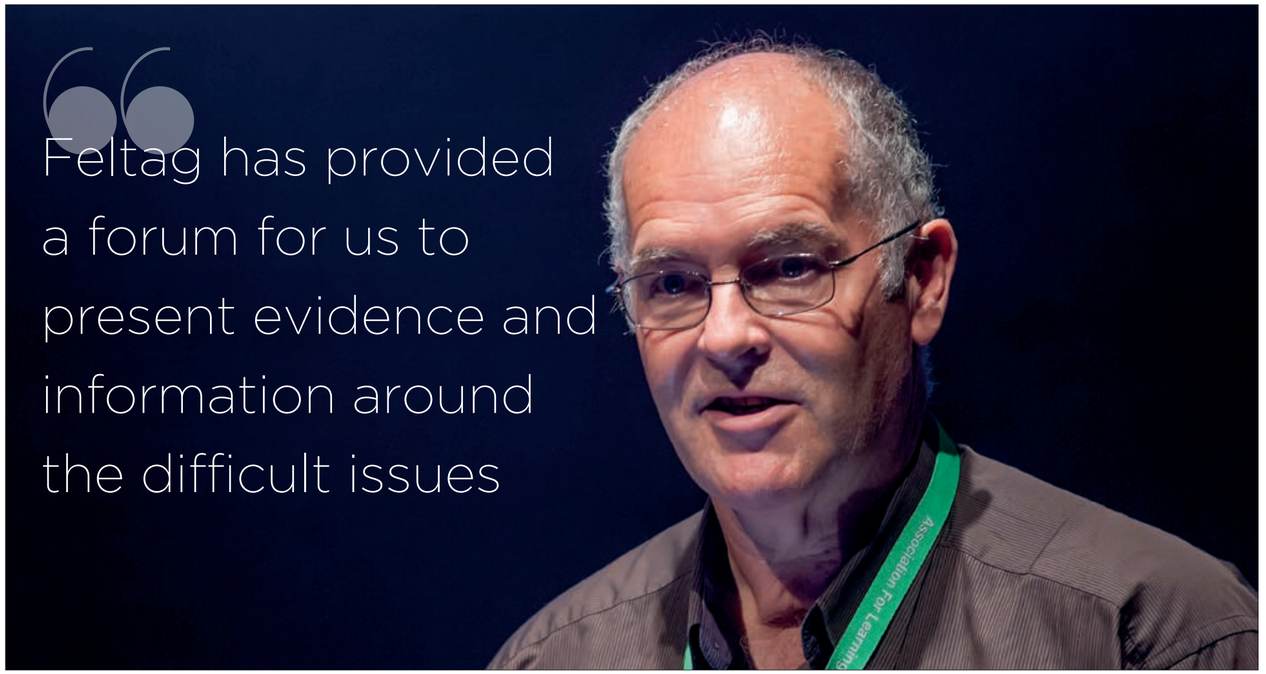
However, one of the major funding issues arose out of one of the few specific targets in the report — the requirement that 10 per cent of every course be delivered online.

Sue Easton, senior project manager for the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, said: "The Skills Funding Agency definition of online learning, defining it as unsupported learning online, contravenes all research findings in terms of what work best, what's best practice — especially to address the needs of lower level learners, those who might not be motivated, with poor digital skills and poor learning and so on."

She also voiced a concern that the sector was in danger of "reinventing the wheel" as many practitioners applied for funding without communicating about what they were doing to other providers.

Dawn Buzzard, learning technology adviser at the ETF, said: "We welcomed the Feltag report, but as we move into picking up the recommendations, I'm a bit disappointed actually, that the 10 per cent has grabbed the attention of the whole of the sector."

However, she acknowledged that it was an "important" issue and said ALT needed to challenge the funding issue.



Nigel Ecclesfield, head of change implementation support programmes for FE and skills at Jisc

ALT chief executive Maren Deepwell

Diana Laurillard

Feltag was established and championed by former Skills Minister Matthew Hancock who was succeeded by Nick Boles in July.

One audience member said: "I'm interested to know whether the change at the top alters the commitment to this kind of working — in the sense that Matthew Hancock and [former Education Secretary] Michael Gove have moved and it was their personal interest in this stuff that meant these processes were set up."

However, Bryan Mathers, head of learning technology development at City & Guilds, said it was up to the sector to ensure the project was not forgotten.

"As far as I'm concerned the Feltag report is just a bunch of sentences," he said.

"The value of Feltag is its momentum, its focus and where there's that focus it translates into a conversation that we're having in the open and ministers tend to take notice of that.

"I think we should do whatever we can to keep that momentum going. When you think about who owns that value, that momentum; we do. We're not talking about the Minister's response to the Feltag report we're talking about the Feltag report because it came from us and I think that's incredible value in a ground up way."

Dr Laurillard agreed. She said: "The process continues by successive events, opportunities for consultation, conversations across all the sectors involved.

"Because, although the Minister commanded it to happen in some sense it was all, everyone involved was giving their time.

"It's our responsibility, and there's a sense in which we don't really need the leadership, it's public momentum."

Maren Deepwell, ALT chief executive, finished the debate saying: "There is only one thing that matters to us as a community — how can we make that change?

"There is time for action, there is a lot ALT can do but we can't do it without support. I very much hope that we can continue to make your voices heard."

We've got to ask, as a membership organisation, as an independent, non-governmental voice, what's the role of ALT?

Diana Laurillard

MARTIN HAMILTON

Are Neets out of Feltag's long reach?

The report of the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (Feltag) made recommendations for improving the use of technology in education. But, asks Martin Hamilton, what does it have to offer those outside the education system?

Readers of *FE Week* will be familiar with the report produced earlier this year by the government's Feltag. It made a series of wide-ranging and challenging recommendations, including a proposal that up to 50 per cent of FE programmes be available wholly online by 2017/18. This might seem ambitious, but with many courses and resources already being delivered digitally first, we are closer than we might think.

Jisc and the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) have worked closely with Feltag and its successor, the Education Technology Action Group (Etag), to help inform policy decisions in this area. We are particularly keen to channel 'what works' from practitioners in terms of state of the art learning technology and often gather information at events like ALT's annual conference.

There seems to be both a problem and solution under our noses. In 2011, NESTA's Next Gen report on digital creative skills highlighted that while the UK had around 100,000 tech vacancies that we are struggling to fill, we also have just under a million young people not in employment, education or training (Neet).

European Commissioner Neelie Kroes stated that there are around a million unfilled tech vacancies across Europe. Clearly there are massive opportunities in and around digital technologies, but the Next Gen report argues that a step change will be required in skills if the UK and other EU member states are to fully exploit them.

Our task as a sector is to implement that change. The new computing curriculum currently being implemented should have a huge impact on digital skills, but what of those who have already been through the education system?

Popular perception of Neets is of young people whose education ceased at GCSE level and who might therefore be considered something of a lost cause in technology intensive areas.

However, Lost in Transition, the Work Foundation's report on the Neet phenomenon, notes that in 2011 nearly a third of young people classified as Neet had qualifications at A-level or above, a third left school with GCSE grades A to C, and one in six had achieved other qualifications such as NVQs. Nearly a third had personal situations that made it difficult for them to engage with conventional education programmes, such as disabilities or responsibilities as carers for family members.

My workshop at conference drew upon the assembled learning technologists' knowledge and expertise to advise Etag on these common Neet scenarios.

I also looked to highlight the achievements from across the sector made possible through our teaching, learning and student experience work — for example our award-winning Mimas Hairdressing resources. We have a long history of working with the FE community to build capability and promote best practice, especially by licensing digital content and providing wifi connectivity through our Janet network.

In addition to our scheduled presentations, conference delegates could also visit our exhibition stand which showcased a new selection of free eBooks for FE, offered advice on staff-student partnerships through our Change Agents Network and showed how colleges and universities are transforming their approaches to assessment and feedback through our Improving Student Assessment toolkit and more broadly through our FE and Skills Development and Resources Programme.

From left: Alex O'Neill, Bryan Mathers, Martin Hamilton, Nigel Ecclesfield and Paul Bailey at Martin Hamilton's ALT conference workshop on Feltag and Neets.

Those who couldn't attend conference can still get involved by contributing to Co-Design, Jisc's new approach to research and development. We are particularly interested in ideas from the community about how learner analytics could be used to improve the student experience.

Why not take a moment to vote on the ideas at our Effective Learner Analytics Ideascale site, or add one of your own?

Let's figure out together how to use technology to enhance the learning experience, and give students the skills they need to work in our digital economy. Now that really would be Neet.

TECHNOBABBLE — WHAT DID THE DELEGATES THINK?

SARAH BARTLETT
FREELANCE LEARNING TECHNOLOGIST

Sometimes I think the sessions can be a bit a bit too small — I have been left wanting more. They're tantalising, whether the speakers are giving a high level sweep of trends or whether they're drilling down into detail about what's going on in individual colleges and universities and sometimes 20 minutes isn't quite enough. It's a really friendly conference and there's a real sense of community and people sharing their ideas and that's what's great.

BOB BANKS
TRIBAL

It's been great reconnecting with why you got into this business in the first place — it really makes you think about going back to the ideals and the power of learning technology to change practice. Catherine Cronin's keynote speech was very much around that theme of openness as a concept and how powerful it is for redefining learning.

LINDA CORRIN
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE LECTURER

There's been some really interesting ideas being thrown around and some really great discussions with people who are researching in similar areas. Between the UK and Australia there are many of the same ideas being discussed and there's a lot we can learn from each other. I don't know if I could pick out a favourite session above all the others. A lot of the ideas are still in development and there's a long way to go but I think it's really exciting.

SUE BENNETT
UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG, AUSTRALIA

I'm really enjoying it. It's been really good to hear about what other people are doing, how they're interrogating their practice and how they're thinking about how this provides evidence to do things differently in education. My favourite session so far has been David White's session on what students' expectations are of technology as they're coming into higher and further education, and how it's very diverse and might not be what we think it is because we're making lots of assumptions.

PETER REED
UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

I've seen some really interesting things about assessment analytics from Tim Newman about academic staff being able to see student's work in previous modules and how that would work and whether it would introduce bias — it opens up an interesting conversation. The atmosphere at the conference has been great — the best part of it is the social aspects, meeting people you haven't seen for a while or people coming up to me and saying 'I know you from twitter'.

JENNY BIMROSE
UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

It's been interesting for me as I'm not an educational technologist so I feel like a bit of an outsider — I'm in employment data and labour market research and most people are in mainstream education. But I've been to a few useful sessions and I think it's been worthwhile from the point of view of making contact with some extremely useful people and knowing who to follow up with.

GRAHAM ATWELL
DIRECTOR OF PONTYDYSGU

It seems since the demise of organisations like Becta, I don't see a lot of common spaces for innovation like this. There's a lot of people doing good things in their own institutions, I'd worry how much joined up collaboration is really going on between organisations. I think we're in danger that everybody is trying to reinvent the learning analytics wheel, when we really should be working more together than in isolation and competition.

SUSAN EASTON
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADULT CONTINUING EDUCATION

The conference has been great. It's one of the few opportunities that higher education gets to have dialogue and real interaction with FE and skills and I think that this process of fostering collaboration and learning from each is one of the most positive things I find about ALT conference. In terms of the speakers I've seen, Bryan Mathers was fantastic, he has a fantastic way of stating things in a way that simple to understand but not being patronising.

TWEETS

#altc
#altc2014

@teachinggrid - Google may have lots of power, but they do use it to make some REALLY awesome stuff

@TamsynMSmith - Need to provide access, resources & admin; challenge expectations around L&T - useful insight @daveowhite #digitalstudent

@PhilVincent - Interesting use of #HootSuite by @teraknor to publish content to students on multiple platforms - including scheduling content!

@DebbieHolley1 - Professional twitter account can be made private (tutor set up, students followed, made private, reassured students re privacy

@jonda1y - Question of the day: Is it time to drop the "Technology Enhanced" from Technology Enhanced Learning?

@cnaamani - @jonda1y Or perhaps we should drop the technology and talk about enhanced learning!

@nancyrubin - Gigantic sin is that we failed to love and care for educational technology (a la Frankenstein) @audreywatters

@nigele1 - Feltag needs more gatherings of practitioners to share practice and experience

@dotsandspaces - Hubris or humility? Is openness the promotion of brand self or much more altruistic?

@socialcatherine - Are there any benefits or recognition for scholarly activity in FE? Nope. Expected and rewarded in HE but not FE

@sheilmcn - "Fun is not entertainment" says Howard Ramsay - lots of fun and engagement in their forensic science mooc

@RiversSue - Interesting session by @agpate on using Twitter to engage students in their learning at Glasgow Uni especially use of backchannel

@IET_LearnDesign - At #altc2014. Catherine Cronin presenting on the nature of openness in education. How does this link to networked individualism?

@gingerblox - Leadership learning cycles experiences of promoting digital learning Calgary board of ed #altc2014 homework 4 principals then share nxt wk

@LindaCorrin - Student dashboards a theme in the Learning Analytics workshop at #altc2014. The promise vs the reality and complexity of implementation

@LearningTechn - #Feltag being grasped by some providers who are getting on with it - what about the others? How will we take them with us?

@Carl_Sykes_TEL - Slicker marketing for MOOCs than for traditional courses. Interesting and very true point

TRIBAL working as one

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